

**Remarks of USAID/Dominican Republic Mission Director
Elena Brineman**

Welcome everyone to this exhibition of USAID's accomplishments in Hurricane Georges Reconstruction in the Dominican Republic, an effort that has helped millions of Dominicans recover from disaster and regain hope for the future. Similar USAID efforts have helped millions in other countries throughout Central America and the Caribbean in the wake of Hurricane Georges and Hurricane Mitch. These are impressive results, but USAID also is helping the Dominican Republic achieve sustained economic growth and reduce poverty, deepen democracy, and improve the health of vulnerable groups. I would like to share some of these other accomplishments and challenges with you.

Sustained USAID efforts over the last several years have helped Dominicans develop economic policies that have made their country one of the fastest growing economies in the hemisphere. USAID has also helped the country adopt measures, like the new social security law, that will help assure a pension safety net and at least minimum universal health care, so that everyone benefits from the growing economy. USAID assistance in development and implementation of a national rural electrification plan will help open up economic opportunities for the 25% of the population that does not currently have electric power. Assistance to small business development will help create opportunities for the one third of Dominicans living in poverty.

An island economy, particularly one dependent upon tourism, agribusiness and light industry, cannot sustain growth if it doesn't protect the environment. USAID has helped the Dominican Republic develop and pass a progressive new environmental law and is helping Dominicans develop environmental norms and standards, and systems for enforcing them. USAID is also helping to develop a national parks system that will protect key natural and cultural resources the country's economy depends upon. Our assistance in the education sector is improving education quality by involving communities and private enterprise in support of local public schools.

USAID support over the past ten years has been instrumental in assuring free and fair elections and deepening citizen participation in democratic processes. Now we are helping make the Dominican Congress more representative of constituents through the introduction of electoral districts and direct voting for individuals, instead of party slates. USAID is also helping progressive Dominicans tackle the problem of making their political parties more democratic. Impressive advances over the past five years in strengthening the Judiciary, improving the independence of the Courts from political and economic manipulation, and improving Court administration owe much to USAID assistance in judicial reform. Much remains to be done in this critical area and in helping to tackle the problem of widespread corruption in the country. USAID is continuing to help brave Dominican leaders in the public sector and civil society address these thorny issues.

Dominicans are marching down the path of fundamental reform of their health sector. This reform will ultimately move them to a mixed public/private, fee for service system, with universal coverage of a basic health package. USAID has helped the country develop and pass recent laws that established the general framework for the reform. USAID is now helping Dominicans explore ways to effectively implement their dream of an equitable health system. HIV/AIDS, with an incidence of over 2.5% in the general population, is a major challenge for the country. USAID's on-going assistance is helping slow the growth of this epidemic. Years of USAID assistance have helped substantially reduce infant mortality in the country, but there is an urgent need to strengthen vaccination coverage to sustain these gains and USAID is lending a hand. USAID investments have also helped make family planning widely available, but adolescent pregnancy and high maternal mortality remain major challenges. USAID is continuing to help Dominicans confront these problems.

As you can see, the American people are helping the Dominican Republic, through USAID, in a host of ways – helping build a better future for our Caribbean neighbors and for Dominican-American relations and helping assure peace is sustained in this small corner of our great world.

Elena Brineman
Director USAID/Dominican Republic